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ABSTRACT

The concept of multicultural education is discussed along with implications for accepting and fostering cultural differences. The concept of cultural pluralism must be broadened to include a commitment to the right to be different if the full benefits of multicultural education are to be realized. A wide range of qualities can be included in multicultural education programs, but the core concept should always include an avoidance of stereotyping ethnic and cultural groups, use of many ethnic groups in pictorial representations, and teacher recognition and encouragement of individual and group differences. Benefits of multicultural education for young children include self-concept development, development of self-confidence, creation of good feelings about themselves and others, and mastery of learning activities from differing backgrounds. Teachers should encourage follow-through and follow-up activities and discussions with the children. (Author/DB)

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MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

by

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A modern view of American society which is gaining currency and to which we at SEDL subscribe is "Cultural Pluralism." This is in contrast with the concept of a melting pot society which prevailed as this nation of North America was being settled by Europeans and which continued until recent years. Although it no doubt was of some importance to emphasize a unity of purpose for people from different backgrounds who were forming a young nation, the melting pot concept nevertheless carried with it unfortunate and disastrous implications that differences were unacceptable. Also, some groups, because of their skin color, did not "meld," and discrimination against these groups has often been vicious.

In accepting the concept of cultural pluralism, the emphasis is on acceptance of differences; however, at SEDL our concept of cultural pluralism requires that one go beyond mere awareness and acceptance of differences to a sensitivity that includes acknowledgment and commitment to a right to be different. If this concept is to have meaning, it

appears that schools have the important task of conveying it to students. Schools also are the laboratories for practicing multiculturalism. Multicultural education is the impetus needed to provide momentum for this important venture. Multicultural education implies different things for different age groups and for group ethnic perspectives, but any of these should include as a minimum:

1. An avoidance of stereotyping ethnic and cultural groups,
2. Use of many ethnic groups in illustrations and pictorial representations in classrooms and schools, and
3. Behavior and activities by adults that demonstrate a recognition of cultural differences and that stress the right for individuals and groups to be different.

It is necessary to clarify the difference between multiethnic and multicultural. In our terminology, multiethnic refers to more than one ethnic group; hence, a multiethnic classroom is one which contains more than one ethnic group. Multicultural means more than one cultural background. In order to avoid stereotyping, which is difficult to do when one focuses attention on a specific cultural or ethnic group, it is important to recognize that members of one ethnic group, such as Mexican Americans, may have considerable variations in their cultural background. At extremes, one may find monolingual Spanish-speaking children or monolingual

English-speaking children, and in between, bilingual Spanish-English where in one group Spanish is dominant and in another English is dominant, even though all are Mexican Americans. This illustration deals with language -- only one of the factors of culture, although an important one. Other differences in cultural backgrounds can also be discovered even though many cultural values are shared by these Mexican Americans. The same can be said of Black, Native Americans, Orientals, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and other Whites. Therefore, it is important to allow for differences of many kinds, not only among but within ethnic groups in order to avoid stereotyping them. This is why we emphasize multicultural programs that may include bilingual (two languages), but never bicultural, which would imply too narrow a cultural perspective. It is easier to illustrate cultural differences in multiethnic schools and this is one reason we try out SEDL programs with multiethnic student populations and multiethnic teachers. It is fully as important, but somewhat more difficult, to emphasize multiculturalism where only one ethnic group is in school or on the teaching faculty, although some impact can be made in such schools through the use of film and other visual materials that show multiethnic participation.

We expect an important benefit of multicultural education for young children to be self-concept development, development of self confidence and good feelings about themselves and others. These, of course, are

important indirect influences on cognitive development; however, cognitive development objectives should be similar for all ethnic groups, and multicultural education does not imply a difference in such goals, although it may imply considerable differences in how the goals are attained by different cultural groups. For example, analytic thinking skills may be considered either valuable or not. In the western world they are considered valuable and all cultural groups expect to master them. How people and schools work out ways for this to be accomplished, however, may be quite different, depending upon the cultural backgrounds of differing groups. Of course, developing similar cognitive skills does not preclude either differences in degree of development by different individuals or differences in content, such as languages (bilingualism), math-science vs. humanities and arts. Hence, the impact of multicultural education, at least for young children, is primarily in self concept development and in suggesting different ways to attain the cognitive goals and objectives, but it also lays the foundation for recognizing and advocating a right to be different.

It is this need for different cultural groups to bring a different perspective to the learning situation that leads us to explore the use of play activities for multicultural education. That is, children can enter the learning activity from differing backgrounds and begin learning in a highly motivated setting which play activities provide. Moreover,

they can increase their ability to learn by engaging in the challenge of learning new forms of play. Finally, they can recognize differences in play from different cultural groups, and this can be the springboard for teachers to help them begin to understand and accept cultural differences. It could also become a laboratory for expression of differences that are acceptable to schools and teachers and provide the raw material for teachers to develop the commitment to the concept of a right to be different for different groups. Such learning and development require that play activities be carefully identified and selected to provide the learning laboratory. It cannot be just play for pleasure's sake. Also, teachers must develop a carefully chosen role between being narrowly instructive and completely free and permissive. Finally, teachers must be skillful with follow-through and follow-up activities and discussions if the full benefits of multicultural education are to be realized. How to do this is an important question and concern.